

God Acts In Love

June 5:2016

Luke 7:11-17

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ who is the Word of God who can even raise the dead, amen.

In today’s Gospel story from Luke, Jesus is on the move. The story right before this one in Luke’s Gospel was the healing of the centurion's servant, the Gospel story from last Sunday. That healing took place in Capernaum while today’s Gospel takes place at the city gate of the town of Nain. That’s about 25 miles, or a day's journey from Capernaum. Imagine you’re walking all that way with Jesus. Maybe you’re a disciple or just one of the curious onlookers. You’ve just walked 25 miles! I’ll bet you’re pretty worn out! I’ll confess to you right now, I get worn out after walking 1 or 2 miles… To have Jesus stop to address this grieving crowd of mourners just as we’re are about to reach our destination, where we can finally sit down, rest, and get a drink of water—maybe even have a slave wash our feet—well, stopping everything now would probably not go over well with all of us tired disciples who have just come 25 miles with him.

So, why does Jesus' stop? Our Gospel text says, "He had compassion for her" (v. 13, NRSV). In the New International Version it says "His heart went out to her" (v. 13, NIV). It is a wonderful Greek word, partly because it is nearly unpronounceable: splag – chniz - omai. Literally it refers to having feelings in the bowels (or other inward parts). We tend to make the heart the seat of emotions, e.g., "his heart went out to her," but in the ancient Jewish traditions, they centered the seat of human emotions in the bowels. We do that to some extent, too, e.g., butterflies in one's stomach, or "gut" feelings. When I looked the word up in my fancy Greek dictionary I discovered it can also mean love. An alternate translation might mean that Jesus loved her. It means much more than simple compassion or a feeling of the heart. In God’s terms love is action and as such Jesus couldn’t have passed her by. His love for her compelled him to stop and do something… So, Jesus delays the road weary, worn-out entourage who have just walked 25 miles with him, to help this widow -- something she didn't even ask for.

So how does this encounter go? Jesus' first words to her are, "Do not weep." When I took my clinical pastoral education I worked for several months as a hospital chaplain. If I had said stop crying to a grieving family member my supervisor would have reprimanded me in a New York minute. I mean, this woman was a widow. Her husband had died leaving her to raise her son alone. Now her only son has died. Why shouldn't she weep? She has good reasons to cry. My usual approach to a situation like this is to say nothing, but to simply be there for the grieving person. I might even venture to say something about crying being okay and quite natural and normal. I might even encourage the grieving person to go ahead and let it out rather than to keep it bottled up. Here’s the difference--Jesus will do for her what no Pastor or, hospital chaplain or even Bishops would be able to do. Jesus has the power and the authority to back up His Words with actions that are able to turn a widow’s wailing into laughter! …

This week’s Gospel, like the story from last week come right on the heels of Jesus Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain. If we recall Jesus words in that sermon you might remember some of the most beautiful, comforting words ever spoken. They have come to be called of the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn… In his preaching, Jesus said: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (6:21b). Today our Gospel gives us a literal, concrete example of one who was weeping, but whose weeping turned to laughter once Jesus showed up.

Weeping isn’t always a bad thing. There are times for weeping. Later in chapter 7, Jesus says: "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.'" (vv. 31-32). A few verses later (v. 38) a woman stands behind Jesus, weeping, and bathes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Jesus does not tell her to stop weeping… Jesus weeps for the city of Jerusalem (19:41). Peter weeps after he realizes he had fulfilled Jesus' words about denying him (22:62). There are times when it is appropriate and expected that one will weep.

We weep when the news from our doctor isn’t what we had hoped and prayed for. We weep when our children and grandchildren make mistakes that we know will lead to problems in their lives. We weep when we see our friends and those we love suffering. There is a time for weeping and it is okay, it is normal, it is natural for our guts to be moved.

It’s time for a short grammar lesson. I noticed that Jesus’ words to the dead boy are “Be Raised.” This is what we call a passive verb. The Bible/Luke does not say, Jesus raised the boy. That would be an active verb. Jesus instead says be raised. This implies that God is the one doing the raising. These words are echoed by both of the crowds witnessing this miracle, the funeral mourners and the disciples and followers of Jesus when they proclaim, “God has raised up a great prophet among us; and God has looked favorably his people.” The two are related. God's favorable look results in raising up a prophet who has the power and authority to raise the dead to life -- to turn a widow's weeping over the death of her only son into joy.

The Greek word epi – skept - omai is translated in our story as God has looked favorably upon us. If you dig deeper you find this word has nothing equivalent in English. Even people who don’t know Greek can pick up on these kinds of words in the Bible. All you have to do is get yourself two different versions and compare the different translations. When the language is different it’s usually because the people who translated the Greek didn’t agree on how the word should be understood. On this issue of “God looking favorably” upon His people we have one of these difficulties. The NRSV has "looked favorably," while the NIV has "come to help". This Greek word epi – skept -omai can also mean:

* to choose or select on the basis of having investigated carefully – to select carefully, to choose after careful investigation [see Acts 6:3]
* to go to see a person on the basis of friendship and with helpful intent – to visit, to go to see
* to care for or look after, with the implication of continuous responsibility – to look after, to take care of, to see to
* to be present with the implication of concern – to be present to help, to be on hand to aid

I love this Greek word because any and all of these definitions could be used of God's actions towards us, his people. God has chosen us. God has visited us. God cares for us. God comes with concern for us and to help us. God does more than just "look at" or even "look favorably" upon us. God sees us as we are, full of sin, regrets, sorrow and in need—totally incapable of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, no matter how strong we might think we are... God heals us, turns our weeping into laughter and then commands us to see needs of others and then care enough to do something about the need. It doesn’t matter if the person is a (relatively) rich Centurion soldier or a poor widow who has just lost her only son.

In our story today, the widow, nor any of her friends approach Jesus or his disciples to ask for anything. Jesus simply saw the need and acted. In contrast, the centurion first sent a delegation of Jewish elders to ask for Jesus' help -- and they report how worthy the centurion is to receive his help; then he sent friends who report that the centurion is unworthy to have Jesus come to his house. He was not worthy to have Jesus defile himself, even though Jesus seems ready and willing to do so. Ask or not, Our Father who art in Heaven knows our deepest needs and is moved in his guts to respond in love with action. Sometimes action taken over the objections of others who have already walked a long distance and are tired. Sometimes the actions are unexpected and even thought to be impossible by the recipient. May we never be too timid or embarrassed to ask Jesus to help, but may we also be open to God’s unexpected actions of love given to us even when we don’t ask. Above all, may we recognize when God is calling us to be His hands and feet and mouth to do His will. We may not be able to raise the dead, but each of us is capable to bring a word of comfort, faith, and love to one who mourns, one who is poor in spirit, or one suffering and weeping now. Your ministry of presence with that person just might result in raising a dead spirit to joy and in doing so make it known that God has indeed visited God’s people and we have good reason to rejoice in God’s love, God’s care, and God’s sure and certain help in our times of trouble… Amen.